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Service Protects Eight Gulf Coast Mussels under the Endangered Species Act *Information from the Public, Scientific Community Informs Final Decision*

Eight Gulf Coast mussels are in danger of becoming extinct or threatened with extinction in the foreseeable future, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. As a result, the Service will protect the species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and will continue to work with conservation partners to aid the species' recovery and address current and future threats.

The Alabama pearlshell, round ebonyshell, southern kidneyshell, Choctaw bean, tapered pigtoe, narrow pigtoe, southern sandshell and fuzzy pigtoe are all freshwater mussels found in streams in south Alabama and the Florida panhandle.

The Service originally proposed these mussels for ESA protection last year. They have disappeared from a large part of their natural range due to threats posed by habitat degradation, poor water quality, environmental contaminants, and other factors.

At the same time, Service biologists, with input from the public and the scientific community, identified 1,494 stream miles in south Alabama and the Florida panhandle that contain critical habitat. Of the total stream miles identified, 11 percent are located adjacent to governmental lands (state, federal, or county), six percent contain government land on one side of the stream and private land on the other, and 83 percent are adjacent to private lands. Large portions of the designation (including sections of the Escambia, Conecuh, Sepulga, Yellow, Shoal, Pea, and Choctawhatchee Rivers) are already designated critical habitat for the Gulf sturgeon.

The ESA requires the Service to identify the location of habitat essential for the conservation of the species, which the ESA terms "critical habitat." This identification helps federal agencies identify actions that may affect listed species or their habitat, and to work with the Service to avoid or minimize those impacts. Identifying this habitat also helps raise awareness of the habitat needs of imperiled species and focus the conservation efforts of other partners such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and individual landowners.

Although non-federal lands are included in these areas, activities on these lands will not necessarily be affected, unless an activity is authorized, funded or carried out by a federal agency. The agency will need to work with the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce or mitigate potential impacts to the species or to ensure actions do not take listed species or adversely modify critical habitat. In addition, public and private landowners still must comply with other provisions of the ESA to protect threatened and endangered species on their lands. The Service relies on a number of voluntary, non-regulatory, conservation programs to provide willing landowners with assurances to protect them for the work they do on their lands.

Today's decision is part of the Service's effort to implement a court-approved work plan that resolves a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA Listing Program. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce litigation-driven workloads and allow the agency to focus its resources on the species most in need of the ESA's protections over the next five years. The final decision to add these eight freshwater mussels to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants, as well as the identification of areas containing habitat essential to the species, is based on the best scientific information available.

The Service held a 60-day public comment period last October, and a 30-day comment period in April, allowing the public to review and comment on its proposal and to provide additional information. All relevant information received from the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry, and other interested parties was considered and addressed in the agency's final listing determination for these species and identification of habitat essential to their conservation.

In addition, the Service utilized an economic analysis to inform and refine its identification of this habitat. Only areas that contain habitat essential to the conservation of these species, and where the benefits of this habitat outweigh potential economic impacts, have been included.

The critical habitat areas identified do not include Department of Defense lands covered by Integrated Natural Resources Management Plans that are protective of the mussels and water quality. This includes approximately six miles of streams within the Fort Rucker Army Aviation Center in Daleville, Alabama, and a 0.25-mile section of Hunter Creek in Covington County, Alabama, within the U.S. Naval Air Station's Whiting Field Outlying Landing Fields.

The listing of these eight mussels under the Endangered Species Act becomes effective on November 9, 2012, 30 days following the October 10, 2012, publication in the *Federal Register*.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwshq, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>

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